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CEREBUS GUYS

no.16

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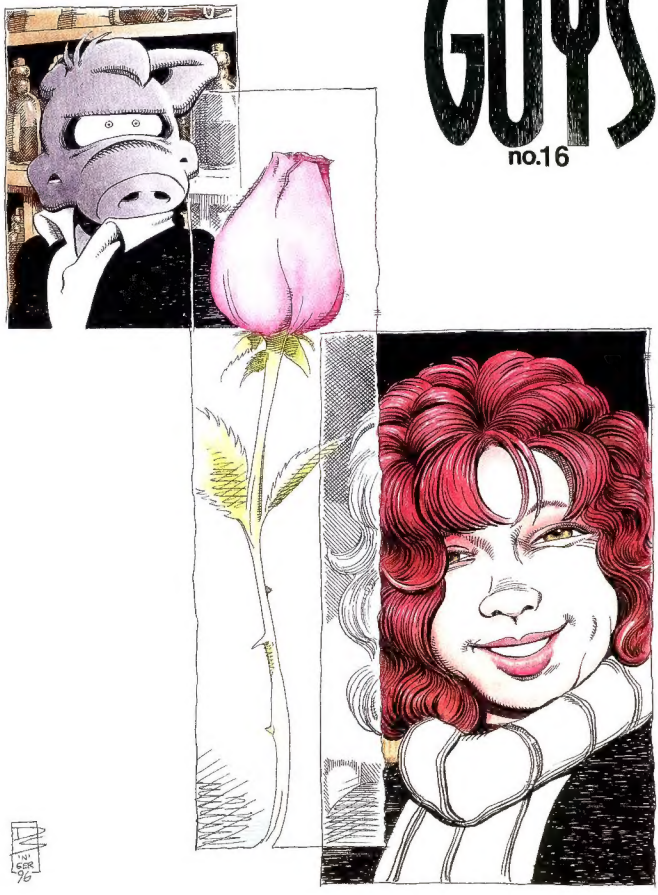

216
MAR

EXCERPT

What is divine in man is elusive and impalpable, and he is easily tempted to embody it in concrete form — a church, a country, a social system, a leader — so that he may realise it with less effort and serve it with more profit. Yet the attempt to externalise the kingdom of heaven in a temporal shape must end in disaster. It cannot be created by charters or constitutions nor established by arms. Those who seek for it alone will reach it together, and those who seek it in company will perish by themselves.

Last issue's Excerpt: *Tender is the Night*, F. Scott Fitzgerald

CEREBUS
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GUYS
a novel
•
(Cerebus 201 to Cerebus 219)

MONTHLY
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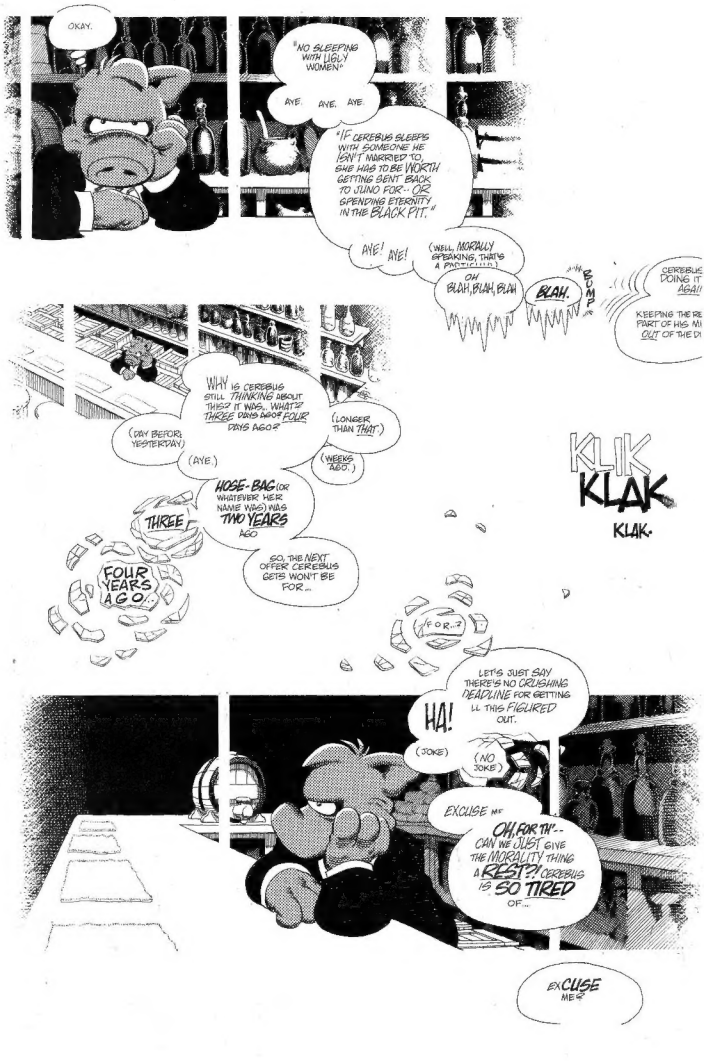

OKAY.
"NO SLEEPING WITH UGLY WOMEN."
AYE. AYE. AYE.
"IF CERBERUS SLEEPS WITH SOMBONE HE ISN'T MARRIED TO, SHE HAS TO BE WORTH GETTING SENT BACK TO JUNO FOR-- OR SPENDING ETERNITY IN THE BLACK PIT."
AYE! AYE!
(WELL, MORALLY SPEAKING, THAT'S A POSITIVE.)
OH BLAH, BLAH, BLAH
BLAH.
BUMP
CERBERUS DOING IT AGAI
KEEPING THE RE PART OF HIS NI OUT OF THE DI
WHY IS CERBERUS STILL THINKING ABOUT THIS? IT WAS... WHAT? THREE DAYS AGO? FOUR DAYS AGO?
(DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY)
(AYE.)
(LONGER THAN THAT.)
(WEEKS AGO.)
HOSE-BAG (OR WHATEVER HER NAME WAS) WAS TWO YEARS AGO
THREE
FOUR YEARS AGO!..
SO, THE NEXT OFFER CERBERUS GETS WON'T BE FOR...
(FOR..?
KLIK KLAK
KLAK.
HA!
(JOKE)
LET'S JUST SAY THERE'S NO CRUSHING DEADLINE FOR GETTING ALL THIS FIGURED OUT.
(NO JOKE)
EXCUSE ME
OH, FOR TH'-- CAN WE JUST GIVE THE MORALITY THING A REST? CERBERUS IS SO TIRED OF...
EXCUSE ME

DON'T I?
KNOW YOU FROM SOMEWHERE.
Oh dear.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE A....
THAT SOUNDS JUST ... AWFUL, DOESN'T IT?
THIS IS SO STRANGE.
UH...
SORRY.
MY NAME'S ...

(as if from a great distance) *Joanne.*

So we have *met before. I* knew *it.* (an awkward pause) *So, how have you been?*

(from deep inside the memory) ***Jaka killed herself.***

(immediately) *Oh, how* awful*! Jaka was*...(assessing his expression) *your*...(uncertainly)...*your wife?*

(still dislocated) ***Aye.* (rediscovering Joanne)** ***Don't you remember?***

(too quickly) *Oh, of* course*!* (warily) *I mean, I* think *I...that is* (no readily apparent way to proceed)...(after a moment) *Are you* sure *we've met?*

(sudden insight) ***Dave!***

Dave. Well...(trying it out) *"Dave," I don't mean to*...

Nonono **(pointing to his chest)** ***Cerebus.***

Cerebus. (puzzled) *So, who's Dave?*

(thinking out loud) ***Dave is...Dave is behind this. Your coming here.*** **(grasping at it)** ***Just like last time.***

(intelligent) *So Dave* introduced *us.*

Aye. **(seeing it from her vantage point)** ***Nay. See, we didn't really meet.*** **(amending)** ***We* met *but*...(not finishing)** ***You lived next door to Cerebus and Jaka. Only Cerebus and Jaka weren't* really *together...***

(misinterpreting) *Ohhh.* (as if reading the last sentence in a story) *And Jaka killed herself.*

Aye. **(without thinking)** ***Because of you.***

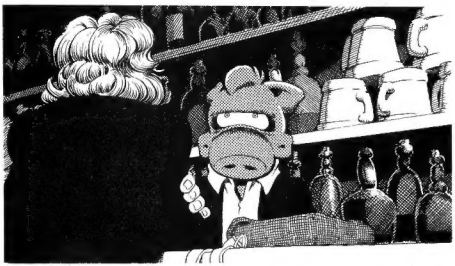
(explosively) *ME?!*

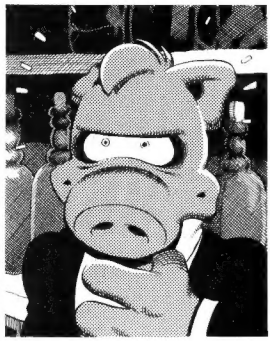
(covering the gaffe) ***Well, no, because of you* And *Cerebus.*** **(a new maturity)...** ***Because of Cerebus, really.*** **(weighing his past)** ***It was Cerebus' fault.*** **(confessional)** ***All of it. All of it was Cerebus' fault.*** **(starting a checklist)** ***Cerebus lied. Jaka wasn't at all like Fred. Jaka didn't mind Cerebus talking to* anyone. *Jaka wasn't jealous* at all. *It was* Cerebus *who was the...***

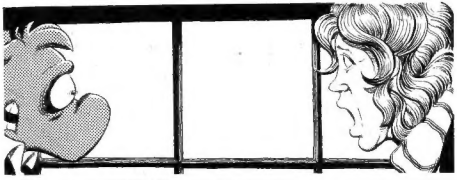
Fred*? You mean, my ex-husband Fred?*

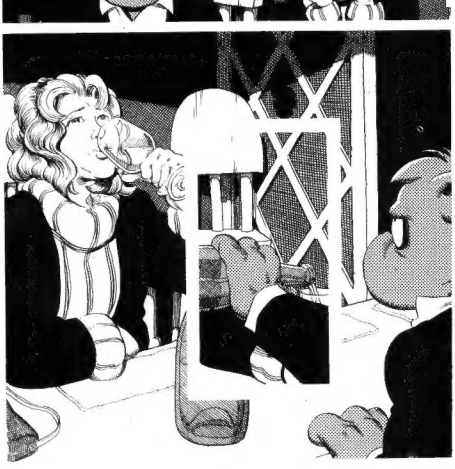
(still mentally finishing his confession) ***Aye. See, Cerebus was the one who...*** **(it sinks in)** **Ex?** ***Husband.***

Yes. (thinking he's looking for an explanation) Because *of his jealousy. Because* (what else is there to add,









really?)...*because of his jealousy.* (self-conscious at her lapse of memory) *I met a lot of people through Fred* (amending it)... *through Fred's work. I*...(laughing lightly) *I don't remember half of them.* (covering for the unintended insult) *I sure don't remember any Dave.* (helpfully) *Unless you mean that obnoxious woman-hater Fred used to*...

***Huh? No no.* (how to explain?) *Dave is*...(gesturing over his head)**

Tall?

***Nonono* (gesturing much higher over his head)**

Very *tall?* (What is this, charades?)

(emphatic) *Dave is*...*Dave is*...*See, we're all* (his voice rising) *WE'RE ALL*...ALL *OF US*...

(her voice overpowers his) *COULD I HAVE A GLASS OF WHITE WINE PLEASE?!*

OF COURSE!!

(At a complete loss as to how to explain me to her, Cerebus makes an elaborate ceremony of selecting a bottle of white wine. Taking down a wine glass he regards it critically and — using his bar rag — wipes away an imaginary spot. He places the glass in front of her and — with excessive care — fills it slowly.)

(attempting to retreat behind a demeanor of professionalism) ***Sure been a lot of rain lately.***

(her curiosity is consuming her like a bonfire) *Yes.* (maintaining the connection) *It's good for the crops, though.* (she raises the glass quickly, draining some of it and replaces it on the bar while the bottle still approximates a pouring position)...*or so they tell me* (Tell me! Tell me!)...

(he fills the glass again and turns to put the bottle back on the shelf, reconsiders and sets it on the bar next to him)

(conversationally) *So, where did you meet Fred?*

Cerebus never met Fred.

You didn't? *Then*...*how did you know he was jealous?*

You *told Cerebus.*

I *told Cerebus.*

Aye.

(she drains half the glass, places it on the bar, and he refills it as if they had been rehearsing the choreography of it for weeks)

(pinning it down) *So,* when *did I tell Cerebus that Fred was jealous?*

(seeing that this could take forever) ***We're in a story…a…book…***

(something new to pin down) Who's *in a book?*

(blurting it out) ***You, Cerebus, Fred, Jaka, everyone out there, this tavern, Lord Julius, the Sepran Empire***

(she's hypnotized now)…

Everything. Like when they say that Tarim created everything and everyone? Or when Terim created everything and everyone? Except it wasn't Tarim or Terim. It was **(shakes his head at the sheer awfulness of it all)** ***Dave.***

(trying to grasp it) *So, Dave is like* (pausing at the blasphemous notion) *Tarim?*

(scowling) ***Let's just say he's the*** **(searching for a suitably deprecatory noun)…*the writer.***

And we're all in it? The book, I mean.

(resigned to it) ***Aye.***

So (a long pause; So, indeed.) *So, what happens now?*

What do you mean?

In the book. What happens now?

Whatever you want to have **(foreboding)** ***happen. Whatever*** **Cerebus** ***wants to have happen. The rest of the book*** **(swept along on the currents of a strange predestination)…*it hasn't been written…*(trapped inside of something)…*yet*** **(trapped further inside of something with the qualifier)…**

(brightly) *Oh!* (cozy in here, isn't it?) *So, what…um…*(newly coy and flirtatious) *What do* you *want to happen?*

(nipping it in the bud) ***Cerebus doesn't love you.***

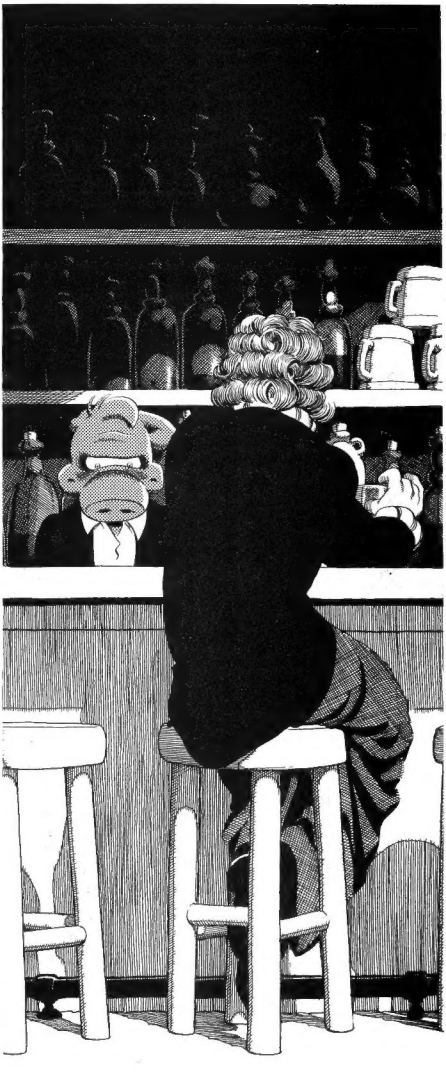
Oh. (wounded in spite of herself) *Well…*(lightly, to mask the hurt) *Did you tell me that…*(trusting her instincts)…last *time?*

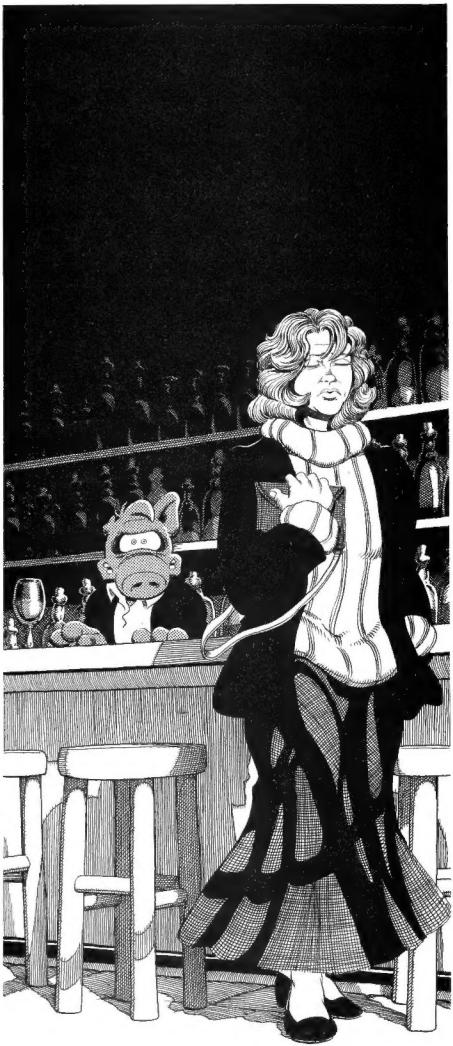
Aye. **(reconsiders)** ***Nay.***

(not unkindly, but definitely upping the ante) *Well, did you or didn't you?*

Nay. **(skirting the issue)** ***Cerebus didn't…that is, Cerebus only wanted you…only wanted to…***

(she's a quick study) *Did we sleep together?*





(unburdened, blushing) ***Aye.***

Oh. (ironic, smiling) *So how was I?*

(disapproving) ***It was wrong. What we did. We…shouldn't have…*****(the new maturity) Cerebus** ***shouldn't have. What Cerebus did was so…so…***

(blanching at her sudden insight) *Did Jaka kill herself because we…we…*

(grimly) ***Aye.***

Oh dear. (the enormity of it crashes over her like a wave) *Oh* (crashing over her again) *dear.* (sagging beneath the burden) *No wonder…no wonder you…*(a tactical distortion)*…hate me.*

(out of his league) ***Cerebus doesn't hate you.***

(a wave of pleasure behind her mask of misery)

Cerebus doesn't **love** ***you.***

(the wave of pleasure vanishes and the misery becomes less of a mask)

…but Cerebus doesn't hate you. **(he melts a little at his own compassion)**

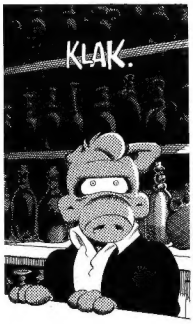
(scanning his face and assessing the extent of his thaw) *I have to go.* (metaphorically, she gathers up her heavy artillery for the siege to come, registering his transparent disappointment as an unexpected bonus)

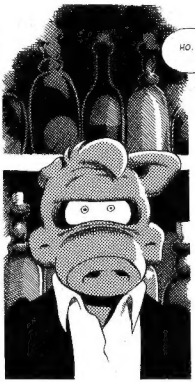
(desperately) ***But…*****(but, what?)*****…you haven't finished your wine!***

(hesitating a moment, but the tactician prevails)
No, I really have to go.
(tactically) *Good-bye.*

(hook, line and sinker)
GOOD**-BYE?*****! But…BUT…!***

KLIK
KLAK


KLAK.


HO.
HO.
HO.

THAT WAS PRET-TY GOOD, DAVE...
YESSIR! THAT WAS DAMN CLEVER.
NOT QUITE CLEVER ENOUGH THOUGH...
TAPADUMP TAPADUMP

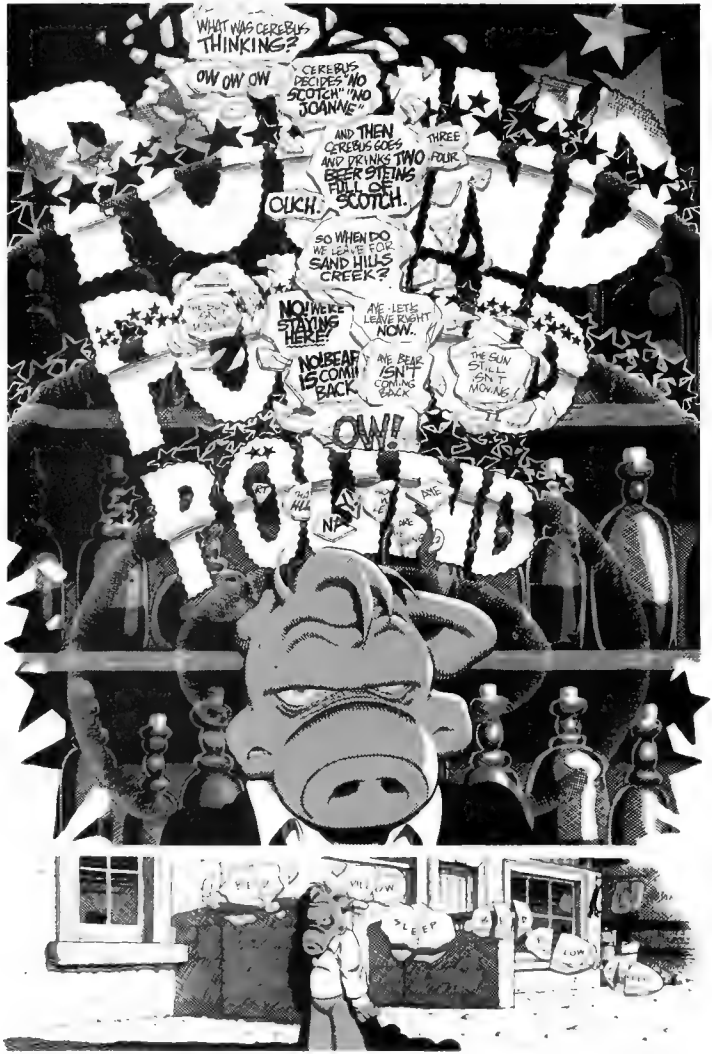
HA!
FIRST YOU GET RID OF BEAR AND HENDERSON AND THE OTHERS
THEN YOU LET CEREBUS STEW IN HIS OWN JUICES A WHILE
THEN YOU SEND IN THE MUSTACHE TO GET CEREBUS THINKING ABOUT SEX...
THEN YOU SEND IN JOANNE.
CEREBUS KNOWS WHAT YOU'RE UP TO, DAVE. CEREBUS IS SUPPOSED TO JUST FALL IN LOOVE, RIGHT?
RIGHT.
JUST LIKE BEAR-- "CEREBUS LOOVES YOU, JOANNE" "CEREBUS WILL DO ABANTHING YOU TEELL HIM TO"
WELL, CEREBUS ISN'T BEAR! SEE WHAT CEREBUS WANTS...

CEREBUS WANTS TO FALL IN LOVE
CEREBUS IS LONELY
SHUT UP

JUST IGNORE THAT VOICE, DAVE.
IT'S NOT THIS REAL CEREBUS

AYE.
OH AYE.
DEFINITELY.
SLEEPING WITH JOANNE IS WORTH GETTING SENT BACK TO JUNO FOR--OR SPENDING ETERNITY IN THE BLACK PIT
AYE
AYE
AYE
(BESIDES, SHE ISN'T MARRIED AND CEREBUS ISN'T MARRIED)
(THAT'S WHAT WAS "WRONG" BEFORE--WE WERE BOTH MARRIED)
AYE AYE AYE
NAY! IT'S STILL WRONG--SHE ISN'T CEREBUS' WIFE--IT DOESN'T MATTER THAT SHE ISN'T FREP
OKAY, BUT IT'S LESS WRONG.
"LESS" WRONG? "LESS" WRONG IS STILL
!
!
!
BU
WA
LET
CERE
FINI
W
ALL RIGHT--FORGET JOANNE FOR A MINUTE
JOANNE
(NAY. IT'S A TRICK!)
(CEREBUS WOULD LOVE TO FORGET JOANNE)
(NOT SO LOUD)
(WHAT IS IT?)
CEREBUS TOLD SWITCHER TO GET LOST BECAUSE CEREBUS "HAD A LOT OF THINKING TO DO"
AYE! AYE! AYE!
WELL, SO FAR ALL CEREBUS HAS MANAGED TO THINK ABOUT IS: SCOTCH/NO SCOTCH,
EYEBROW/NO EYEBROW,
AND JOANNE/NO JOANNE.
THE EYEBROW NEVER CAME BACK AND IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE JOANNE LEFT SO WHY DOESN'T CEREBUS DO WITH "JOANNE/NO JOANNE" WHAT CEREBUS DID WITH SCOTCH/NO SCOTCH?
FOUR. TWO!
(WHICH ISS?)
JUST DECIDE "NO JOANNE" AND STOP FUCKING (NO SWEARING) THINKING ABOUT IT.
!
AYE.
CEREBUS SEES WHAT CEREBUS MEANS.
AYE AYE AYE

FINELY.
FINELY
HIC
GERBIZZLE GEDDING SUM REEL THINGING DUNN-- AN' ALL ID TOOK WUZ SHEEZ FIVE THREEE TWO LIDDLE SCODGES!
NOT EVEN BUGGIDS... JES TWO BEERSTEINS FULL)
HUSHA HUSHA BEER STEINS FULL
(WELL DUNN!)
('EAR! 'EAR!)
(HOW GERBLISS FINELY KNOWS WHUDDA SED)
AYE! (WHUD WUZZ IT AGAIN?)
ANUTHER SCODGE!
(NONONO NO NON WHUD GERBLISS GOYNA DOE WUZZ IT WUZZ!)
OH YEAH! GERBIZZEZ GOIN' HOME! BACK T' SAN'HILLZ CREEG WHERE GERBLISS WUZ BORNEN HIC RAZED!
GREAPE IDEA
(HEY! LEAVE ANUTHER SCODGE!)
ANUTHER HIC GRADE IDEA!)
AYE! GEDDUDDA THIS SNODDY T'CABMIN PLACE GED BACK T'WHERE REEL PEEPLE LIVE..
HIC
JUS' LEAVE FIRS' THINGENTH' MORNINGSAN' SPENTH' SUMMER WALKEN' ACROSS ESTARSEEN AN' HIC BE BACK IN GOOD OL' SAN'HILLZ CREEG AFORE TH' HIC
FALLS--SNOW. FALL SNOWS ?.. FALLS" SNOWS
??
FALSE NOSE!
HA
HIC! THIZEEZ GRADE
REEL THINGING
REEL PEEPLE
REEL HIC SCODGE


WHAT WAS CEREBUS THINKING?
OW OW OW
CEREBUS DECIDES "NO SCOTCH" "NO JOANNE"
AND THEN CEREBUS GOES AND DRINKS TWO BEER STEINS FULL OF SCOTCH.
THREE
FOUR
OUCH.
SO WHEN DO WE LEAVE FOR SAND HILLS CREEK?
NO! WE'RE STAYING HERE!
AW... LET'S LEAVE RIGHT NOW.
NO BEAR IS COMIN BACK
WE BEAR ISN'T COMING BACK
THE SUN STILL ISN'T MOVING.
POUND
OW!
NAP
YELLOW
SLEEP
ZZZ

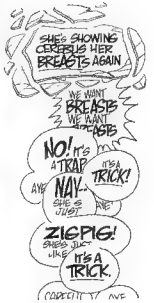
TWO DRINKS TWO!
DAYS TO GET RID OF A HANGOVER.
AYE AYE AYE
NO MORE BUCKETS OR BEER STEINS FULL OF SCOTCH
NAY! NAY! NAY!
CEREBUS WILL WAIT UNTIL THE FIRST DAY OF SUMMER FOR BEAR TO COME BACK..
AYE! AYE! AYE!
IF BEAR HASN'T COME BACK BY THEN ..CEREBUS WILL HEAD WEST TO SAND HILLS CREEK
AYE AYE AYE
CEREBUS WILL NOT SLEEP WITH UGLY WOMEN
NAY! NAY! NAY!
CEREBUS IS NOT GOING TO GET ALL WORKED UP ABOUT ANY WOMAN (SINCE THEY NEVER COME BACK ANYWAY)
NAY NAY. NAY
CEREBUS IS ONLY GOING TO HAVE TWO SMALL GLASSES OF SCOTCH WHEN CEREBUS IS DONE HIS SHIFT
(THREE) (FOUR) (SIX!)
TWO (LARGE) GLASSES
(TWO LARGE GLASSES AND ONE SMALL GLASS)
ONE AGAIN
LET'S HAVE ONE NOW!
A BUGGID.
AHEM.
TWO. SMALL. GLASSES. WHEN CEREBUS IS DONE HIS SHIFT.
SIGH! SIGH! SIGH!
WELL?!
AYE AYE AYE
(GUNS ALMOST DOWN ANYWAY.)
(AYE. AND CEREBUS WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO STOP AFTER TWO GLASSES)
(AYE) (AYE) (AYE)

KLIK KLAK
HI AGAIN..
KLAK
UH
HI
?
PLOP
???
!
JOANNE?
SO!
GUESS WHAT.

UH!
WHAT?
I
DON'T LOVE YOU
EI THER
OH
ISN'T THAT GREAT?
OH!
AYE..
GREAT
I MEAN YOU MUST BE SOOO SICK OF BEAUTIFUL WOMEN COMING IN HERE AND JUST THROWING THEMSELVES AT YOU -- WANTING YOU TO FALL IN LOVE WITH THEM
HUH?
OH!
AYE
I KNOW I AM..
HA HA HA!
NOT BEAUTIFUL WOMEN OF COURSE
THAT WOULD MEAN :(
!!!
I'M SORRY.. I MUST BE KEEPING YOU FROM SOMETHING IMPORTANT
NAY!
ARE YOU SURE?
AYE
OH.. GOOD

WHAT I'M SAYING IS...
I KNOW EXACTLY HOW YOU FEEL
AWE?
OH SURE! WHEN SOMEONE SAYS TO ME "I LOOOVE YOU."
NAH
DO YOU KNOW WHAT I HEAR?
WHAT I HEAR IS "I CONTROL YOU."
"I OWN YOU."
"YOU."
"ARE."
"MINE."
SKITCH SKITCH
THAT'S WHAT I WEAR - AND BELIEVE ME
WHEN I HEAR IT
I RUN AS FAST AS I CAN IN THE OTHER DIRECTION
I MEAN, THAT'S WHY IT WAS SO ... SO.
REFRESHING WHEN YOU SAID YOU DIDN'T LOVE ME...
(BULLSHIT...)
I MEAN, IT REALLY WAS...

MAYBE YOU'RE RIGHT ABOUT THIS ... "DANE" CHARACTER. I MEAN, I DO REMEMBER YOU FROM SOME WHERE
AND YOU KNEW ABOUT FRED
MAYBE WE ARE ALL IN A BOOK
IT'S NOT THAT MUCH MONSTER THAN THE INFINITY SERPENT AND ALL THAT STUFF, RIGHT?
SO THE WAY I LOOK AT IT..


SHE'S SHOWING CERBERUS HER BREASTS AGAIN
WE WANT BREASTS WE WANT BREASTS
NO! IT'S A TRAP
IT'S A TRICK!
AYE
NAY..
SHE'S JUST
NE
ZIGPIG!
SHE'S JUST LIKE
IT'S A TRICK.
CONCEIT
AYE

"DANE" MUST HAVE BROUGHT US BACK TOGETHER FOR A REASON
IF HE'S THE WRITER HE MUST KNOW THAT YOU DON'T LOVE ME
AND HE MUST KNOW THAT I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO LOVE ME

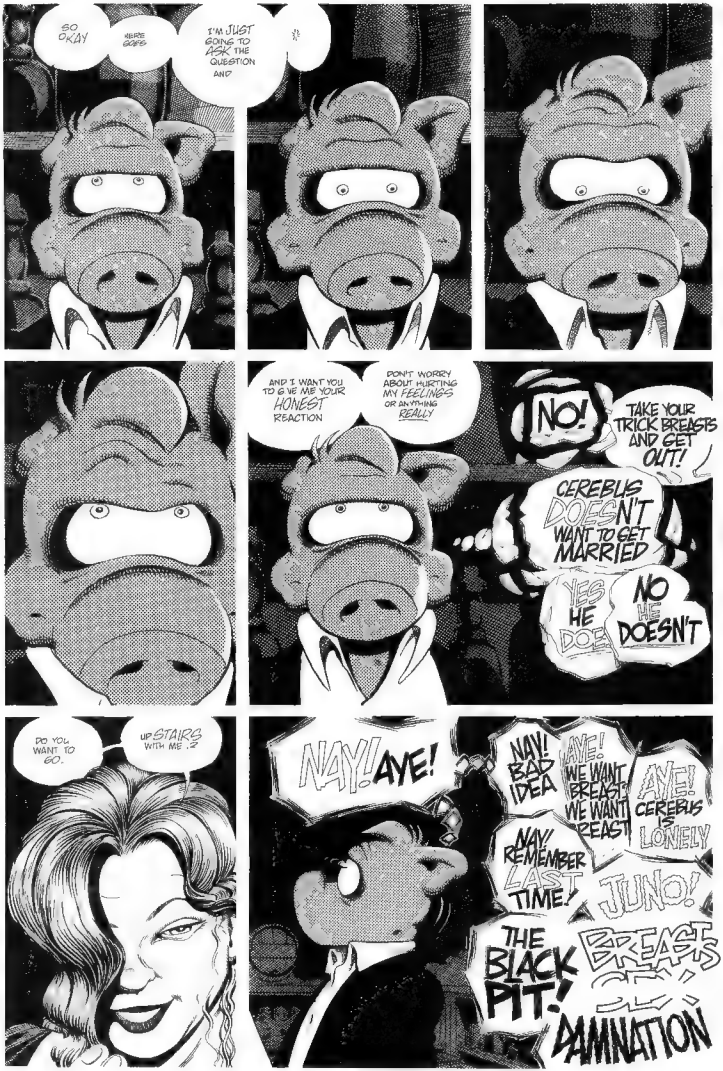
IF IT'S A TRICK..
AYE? AYE? AYE?

IT'S A REALLY GOOD TRICK
AYE
AYE
AYE

SO I CAME IN HERE TO
ASK YOU SOMETHING

SHE WANTS TO GET MARRIED!
RUN AWAY!
CERBERUS CAN'T RUN AWAY. CERBERUS WORKS HERE
ON
RIGHT

SO I'M JUST GOING TO
EXCUSE ME
EXCUSE ME?
UP HERE
THANK YOU...


SO OKAY
HERE GOES
I'M JUST GOING TO ASK THE QUESTION AND
AND I WANT YOU TO GIVE ME YOUR HONEST REACTION
DON'T WORRY ABOUT HURTING MY FEELINGS OR ANYTHING REALLY
NO!
TAKE YOUR TRICK BREASTS AND GET OUT!
CEREBUS DOESN'T WANT TO GET MARRIED
YES HE DOES
NO HE DOESN'T
DO YOU WANT TO GO.
UPSTAIRS WITH ME ;)
NAY!
AYE!
NAY! BAD IDEA
AYE! WE WANT BREASTS! WE WANT BEAST!
AYE! CEREBUS IS LONELY
NAY! REMEMBER LAST TIME!
JUNO!
THE BLACK PIT!
BREASTS
DAMNATION

NAY
AYE
SO. WHI
WHICH WAY DO WE--?

?
?
WHAT

COMICS AND THE MASS MEDIUM

Ultimately (I would maintain) Television has to fail in its plan for total conquest. Television — once it merges completely with computers and becomes inseparable from them — will divide human society into the hypnotized and the non-hypnotized. After that happens, I believe that comic books will begin to achieve greater prominence, because comic books — at their best and most effective — are informed by individual awareness, insight, and inspiration. Once everything that *can* be put on Television *is* put on Television, once every human discipline and interest which can be reduced to binary code and pixillated *has* been reduced to binary code and pixillated, what remains will be the last enclave of human existence: individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

We aren't ready. In my view, we aren't ready to take our natural place in the arts-and-entertainment scheme of things. But that's okay. There's plenty of time, and (in my view) we are moving inexorably in the right direction.

The biggest impediment — as is usually the case— is with ourselves — or, rather, with the portrayal of who we are (but actually aren't) in *Comics Buyer's Guide, Comics Retailer, Fan, Wizard,* and at comic-book conventions. A portrayal which would lead any impartial investigator to conclude that we are tremulous, fearful creatures, clawing anxiously at Television's door, dragging action-figure toys, *X-Files* and *Star Wars* merchandise behind us like Jacob Marley's chains and ledgers and counting boxes. Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration are viewed (in this portrayal) as curious by-products and minor keys in the symphony of the comics "industry" — instead of as our only hope for a secure future.

Again, that's okay. As I read the above-mentioned publications or on those rare occasions when I find myself at a comic-book convention or in a comic-book store, I just accept the fact that (for the time being and in the forseeable future) they represent what at least passes for the majority view in the comic-book field — that what has saved us and what will save us is our tenuous connections with Television and movies. As I've explained in the first three instalments of "Comics and the Mass Medium," I consider this a completely mistaken notion. What I do find gratifying is that all reliable evidence indicates that that view — the "industry" view — is completely doomed. By its own definition — that comic books are successful only insofar as they have been absorbed and transmogrified by Television — the "industry" guarantees that it will be drained of its lifeblood incrementally but irrevocably, surviving just long enough to ease the transition from a comic-book field centered on Television to a comic-book field centered on comic books. The Legion of Junkies — the fully hypnotized of the "industry" — will be unable to see merit in my arguments, which I find even more gratifying. How suitable a repercussion that the parasitic "industry" which fed for so many years on the lifeblood of writers and artists now finds itself attached to Television — the biggest parasite of them all — and is so thoroughly in a state of denial that it won't even begin to conceive of detaching itself before it is a drained husk, breathing its last.

I believe that the comic-book medium does have a nascent Spirit (how appropriate that that is the name of Will Eisner's character, which was the first genuine incarnation of individual insight, awareness, and inspiration in our medium's history),— and that this Spirit was both shocked and offended at its very core when the last of the "industry" trade shows were taking place in '94, where monolithic and fascistic booths (Who could forget Tekno Comics' giant mailed fist grasping its lightning bolt, the dry ice clouds, its virtual reality pods, and its wall full of Televisions — Nimoy, Spillane, Gaiman. Nimoy, Spillane, Gaiman? The Spawnmobile? DC/Time-Warner's black corporate skeleton likewise punctuated with Televisions? Liefeld's spaceship with its little Television?) ascended towards the heavens like soulless and implacable steel and glass skyscrapers. A threshold had been crossed and everyone, even Californians — who exist in Television's very Heart of Darkness and thus qualify as the Most Hypnotized of the Hypnotized Society — knew it. Very little was said in print, the Hypnotized comics media waxing enthusiastic as attendance figures were fudged upwards and the myth was advanced that "a good time was had by all," when all verifiable reports were of stricken and discombobulated "industry" adherents lurching around the site wondering aloud: "Where will it all *end*?"

Lest I be accused of ivory-towerism (interesting environment where when you expend time, energy, and money going out to promote your work, you are accused of demagoguery and shameless self-promotion, and when you stay home and do your work, you're accused of retreating to your ivory tower), I can understand these "industry" quirks when I face the centerpiece of my own Television addiction: the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team. The Leafs are the good guys, and all other teams (especially the Montreal Canadiens) are the bad guys. The Leafs trade away Wendal Clark and I hate the guy; the Leafs reacquire him and I love him again. Like "industry" adherents with their inexplicable love of the Fantastic Four or Batman and their unswerving belief that these trademarks have inherent value, I am inexplicably loyal to those little blue uniforms gliding around my little box of coloured lights and sound resembling little, blue tropical fish or strangely mutated blue fireflies. I am making progress in willing myself to disengage my loyalties and in moving the Leafs step by step away from the core of my being. It isn't easy — it isn't easy at all — and I consequently empathize with those fighting a similar addiction whose ultimate "high" is seeing anything born in the comic-book field represented on Television.

The first signs already exist that individual awareness, insight, and inspiration will ultimately prevail against the "industry." Creator ownership, long overdue in the field,

has gone from a marginalized quirk to an inescapable centerpiece in what comic books are. Even while the majority of comic-book stores are filled with this month's hot crossover, flash-in-the-pan special, or hyped and ballyhooed first issue, creator-owned titles are making incremental progress in relative sales. *Cerebus* goes up and down the distributor sales charts like a yo-yo (Peter Bagge alluded to the same syndrome in a recent issue of *Hate*): #161 this month, #217 next month. Up forty-five places and then plummeting fifty places. Always with the same approximate sales. Sometimes rising relative to Television comic books (*Batman, Spider-Man,* et al.) even when the circulation has declined by several hundred copies.

You don't have to be at this game for the twenty years that I've been at it to reach the conclusion that these numbers are largely — if not completely — meaningless and that the genuine forward progress of the medium is taking place elsewhere: in the manifold realms of individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Barry Windsor-Smith is doing some very interesting things with word balloons in *Storyteller*, playing with the eye's movement across the page and developing new ways of reading the page in the process. Each innovation that he develops — when it "works" and even when it doesn't — leads to the realization that creators have just begun to scratch the surface of what is possible in the comic-book medium. The most significant observation in recent years was Howard Cruse's retrospective admission that he started *Stuck Rubber Baby* thinking, "300 pages. I can fit the history of the *world* into 300 pages," only to discover just how limited 300 pages can be. It is an experience I shared in the 500 pages of *High Society* which led me to leave *Church & State* open-ended, to allow it to grow internally, and which allowed me to make more effective use of 500 pages of *Jaka's Story*. Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's recently completed *From Hell* (besides being a contender for best graphic novel to date) demonstrates clearly just how much Alan learned about the implied confines of the comic-book medium in doing *Watchmen, V for Vendetta,* and *Killing Joke*, and what progress he has made in individualizing his work since those earlier experiments. It is for this reason — the evidence of how much is yet to be discovered in the "how" and "where" of creating comic books — that I say that I don't think we are ready. And it is for another reason — the glacial pace at which Television and computers are merging — that I say I think there is time.

Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Donna Barr, in her recent *Comics Journal* interview, shows herself to be one of the heralds of this forthcoming age — doing her comic books in such a way as to satisfy her own insight, awareness, and inspiration. Clearly, this leads her to be impatient at several junctures with her largely sympathetic interviewer. In explaining her fascination with World War II from the German side of things: "Both the major event of the 20th century and people who were its central focus have been a focus of my attention, and ever since I can remember. I have no answer for this, because I don't know it myself. I'm obsessed. I'm possessed. It's completely subconscious. It probably has something to do with bloodlines, or with mythological interpretation of the 20th century, but if I got into that it would take up a whole book and interest no one but me." Her point is well taken by someone (like myself) who sees individual awareness, insight, and inspiration as the point itself, the defining characteristic of the Spirit of comic books as a medium. To the Television-centered, Barr's work is profoundly inexplicable. What about the Jews, the veterans, the homosexuals who would be offended by what you're doing? As is only appropriate, the question is, in its turn, inexplicable to Donna Barr. Having studied centuries of German history, everything she is doing is informed by wider perceptions than those allowable within Television's confines, where "Nazis = Bad Guys" suffices for the Legion of Junkies and eliminates "the major event of the 20th century" from further consideration.

Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Donna Barr and Howard Cruse don't experiment much with structure in their use of the comic-book medium. Barry Windsor-Smith and I do. Alan Moore doesn't. Awareness, individualized, pursues its own preferences along its own preferred avenues of exploration. For some it is content exclusively. For some it is structure and content. One of the first effects of creator-ownership as a rising element in the comic-book field has been the turning away from the collective environment by individuals who understand, whether consciously or unconsciously, that introspection is of greater value than is extroversion. There is no "right" or "wrong" way for a creator to create his or her comic book — there is only the exploration of those avenues the individual creator is inclined to explore and the pursuit of individual preferences — sometimes for a page or two and sometimes for the entirety of a career. "Where are we going, and what are we doing?" — the fundamental question posed by the very existence of *Comics Retailer, Comics Buyer's Guide, Wizard, Fan,* and comic-book conventions (and to which the only sensible answer is: "We're going in every direction at once, and we're not doing very much") — has less to do with the future of the environment (in my view) than the individual answers to be obtained from asking, "Where am I going, and what am I doing?"

This is true of retailers as much as it is true of creators. The vast majority of retailers are imprisoned, by choice, within the confines implied by "Where are we going, and what are we doing?" Their stores are living testimony to the two-decades-old answers to that question: "We are buying way too many corporate-owned and -controlled comic books and storing them in our back rooms and basements." "We believe what the corporations who publish these books tell us about them no matter how well or badly they sell." "We believe that *X-Files, Star Wars,* and *Star Trek* will attract new customers into our stores."

There are a handful of stores begun in the last two or three years which do not subscribe to these views, of which Nottingham, England's Page 45 is the foremost example.

Page 45 sells a lot of super-hero comics — which I hadn't realized until I saw a computer printout of their

sales. Super-heroes are the biggest selling item at Page 45. The largest difference between the traditional store's answers to "Where are we going and what are we doing?" and Page 45's is the decision to answer the second question first: "What are we doing?" Page 45 is selling comic books to interested customers. Their first priority is their subscriber list and filling — accurately — each subscriber's pull-file order. The fact that they are drawing subscribers away from all the other stores in the area (including the pop-culture-wannabe shop next door which is awash in *X-Files, Star Wars,* and *Star Trek* ephemera) points up the central flaw of "industry" stores not having "pull-file reliability" as their first priority. It's not that Page 45 is willing to get their subscribers a copy of *Patty Cake* and *Hilly Rose* (though they are in the extreme minority of stores in that they *are* willing to do this); it's that they can also guarantee each issue of a *Spider-Man* or *Batman* title. This is a pretty basic, simple, and sensible answer to "What am I doing?": building a subscriber base and ordering comic books to fill the immediate demand.

They display a small percentage of the available DC, Marvel, and Image material that they order — anything that they have confidence in as a display item: *Sandman, Marvels, Kingdom Come, Watchmen, Dark Knight, The Maxx, A Distant Soil* — essentially books with the maximum allowed and allowable creator control in the corporate context. This approach is not only sensible as an answer to "What am I doing," it merges very well with "Where am I going?" It presupposes that once the creator-control genie is out of the "industry" bottle, it is inevitable that stores are going to rely on creator-controlled books rather than corporate-controlled books for their "bread and butter." It also presupposes that — whether it takes a decade or two or three — creator-control will supersede and virtually eliminate corporate-controlled books. Page 45 is structured in such a way that it is going where comic-books-centered-on-comic-books are going — at a 90-degree angle to where comic-books-centered-on-Television are going. Their subscriber list for corporate-controlled titles will wax and wane, surge and subside, and virtually disappear in the fullness of time, leaving their store fundamentally unchanged — an outlet for state-of-the-art individualized expressions in the comic-book medium. Since they have no need to consider how many cases of *X-Files* trading cards they're going to need, whether to invest in a "dump" for *Star Wars* action figures or role-playing games, Stephen and Mark actually have time to devote to their second — and equally sensible priority — developing and maintaining an ongoing supply of the best the comic-book medium has to offer: opening up direct accounts with those publishers and self-publishers whose books aren't readily available through distribution channels. What makes these works "the best the comics medium has to offer"?

Sales and Stephen and Mark's awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Of course!

It's their store.

"What am I doing?"

1. I am reliable in supplying comic books to my subscribers. 2. I am developing and maintaining a supply of what I consider to be the best the comic-book medium has to offer. 3. I look for new comic books to support and maintain in stock.

Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

We are going somewhere. In fact, we're already there. We just aren't ready yet. Such is the nature, I suspect, of individualizing. For all of us whose lives revolve — to one extent or another — around Television and its supplicants, movies and music, it is almost impossible to perceive how different an environment made up of individuals is from a collective environment. Television deals with the illusory "We," collectivist feelings and prejudices, communities and societal notions which presuppose the need for Good Guys and Bad Guys. Us and them. "We" know "we" are good, because "they" are bad. Small wonder — in the aftermath of the Berlin Wall coming down — that Television has seized upon the comic-book fundamental best suited to its purposes: the clear demarcation between Good Guys and Bad Guys. It is a dying viewpoint (a persuasive argument could be made that the Berlin Wall coming down was the final nail in its coffin) being overtaken by the inescapable fact that, ultimately, nothing exists beyond individual perceptions (wait a minute — didn't homosexuals used to be the Bad Guys?).

We are going somewhere. Mercifully the process cannot be hurried, hinging as it does on the exact (and unknown) number of creators who are choosing to rely on their individual awareness, insight, and inspiration, and retailers who are willing to do the same. Progress is fitful or — to be more accurate — the perception of progress is fitful. The comic-book environment which is centered on comic books (creators and retailers going about their business, three steps forward, two steps back) resembles a major airport in the middle of a winter storm only (I would maintain) because of those "industry" adherents of the comic-books-centered-on- Television, who — if they aren't whining about their flight being cancelled — are trying to rebook on another airline to another destination or are telling everyone who will listen that the airport itself is structurally unsound and could collapse at any moment. Just so many tedious Chicken Littles who differ only from their children's story counterpart in the fact that the sky *is* falling. But, I would maintain, it is only their sky — corporate-controlled comic books and comic-books-centered-on-Television — which is plunging earthward.

There is no way of telling how advanced the process of individualizing is, whether among creators or retailers. It can't be discussed intelligently because — as Donna Barr points out — it would, indeed, take a book to describe each individual's history and progress, and the book would be of interest to no one except the individual himself or herself. It is clear that a dissatisfaction with Television and a dawning awareness that Television represents a wildly inaccurate portrayal of human existence is something of a precursor to the individualizing process, and that — once set in motion — the individualizing process itself makes the collectivizing impulse (wherever it occurs) an object of disinterest.

Creator ownership and the control of their individual creativity by individual creators is at the root of the up-

heaval in the direct market and the actual source of alarm (whether they recognize it or not) among the "industry" adherents of collectivized thought and action. Industry roundtables, conferences, and symposiums appeared briefly and have now vanished. Much verbiage is still expended in the direct market over how to "grow" the market, how to reach out to non-comics readers and create a diversity of titles. The fact remains that — unless the individual in question is willing and able to sit down and write and draw a comic book or a graphic novel or is willing to open a store which emphasizes creator-controlled and -owned series instead of corporate-controlled and -owned series — there is really nothing that they can do apart from buying more good comics (whatever they conceive "good" to be).

I would suspect that those retailers who have retreated from the comic-book environment, grasping at the Television straw of diversification into *X-Files* and *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, were never really *in* the comic-book environment to begin with. They have learned their adherence to trends, their adherence to brand names, their adherence to Television icons from Television (as I learned my adherence to the Toronto Maple Leafs from Television). DC, Marvel, Image, and Dark Horse are — to them — ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox, month-by-month winners and losers, Good Guys and Bad Guys. Of course, there is no accurate Television analogy in the comic-book field. That is the strength of the medium, the strength of the Spirit of comic books. It is inconceivable that a writer would own his own television show and be solely responsible for every aspect of production and have the last word governing content and direction. Completely inconceivable. But, because DC, Marvel, Image, and Dark Horse are represented as ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox, it is the rare retailer who can even conceive of comic books existing outside of that structure. They could read every word of the Fantagraphics catalogue and — having no Television network analogy for Fantagraphics — see nothing there. And, seeing nothing there, would be content to watch their comic-book business erode to nothing rather than perceive something outside of the Big Four Networks.

Donna Barr's assertion that she is both obsessed with and possessed by her work is a direct implication of creator control and ownership. If you consider how many creators who own and control their books have hung on through each successive wave of turmoil in the direct market, who have hung on through years of hand-to-mouth existence, successive publishers, various formats, and who still produce, who still bring their work to market, it speaks volumes about the addictive nature of exploring your own creativity. Certainly there have been few creators in the last decade who — having achieved some semblance of a good living from their books — have elected to throw in the towel and pursue some other venue for their creativity. Even the least viable, least marketable titles seem to soldier on — sustained by the promise of each small rise in circulation, each substantial (and sometimes insubstantial) order and reorder. If a sufficient number of Page 45 stores were to come into existence, how many of these titles would be required to sustain them? From Stephen and Mark's standpoint, enough titles already exist — their display problem is far more one of selecting material from the plethora of available candidates, than it is trying to figure out how to fill their shelves. This is why I say that in answer to the question "Where are we going?" it seems self-evident that we are already there. And also that we are not ready yet.

Not ready for what? Not ready for another boom, another exponential expansion. Collectively, we haven't grown up a bit, we haven't learned a thing, and we are just waiting for a chance to repeat our mistakes. A sudden surge in sales like the one which followed the Image launch in the summer of 1992 and which rolled through the environment for a year or so, and we would simply find ourselves up to our eyeballs in the latter-day equivalent of *Tekno Comics, Valiant, Defiant,* and all the other corporate wannabes.

It seems clear that Ron Perelman's ill-fated ownership of Marvel Comics mirrored the misapprehensions of the direct market. With his theory of buying up trading card-companies, focusing on the trademarked characters, planning a chain of Planet Hollywood-style Marvel restaurants, buying a substantial interest in Toy Biz, and getting as many Marvel cartoons on Television as he could, the difference between his (forgive my bluntness) stupidity and that of the average retailer amounted to the number of zeroes on the end of their respective cheques. It all made perfect sense to the Legion of Junkies — a vertically integrated entertainment empire touching on and controlling everything that made comic book stores successful. In my view it was doomed to failure from the precise moment that Tom DeFalco informed Perelman's suits that the defection of the Image creators was unimportant and that they would be forced to come back to Marvel when Image failed. The theory that artists and writers were interchangeable, expendable, and unimportant was firmly entrenched at Marvel for a number of years — dating back at least as far as Jim Shooter's reign of terror. Over a reasonably short period of time, everyone at Marvel who could remotely be considered in the comic-books-centered-on-comic-books camp was fired (or moved to the periphery) and replaced by a comic-books-centered-on-Television adherent. Gary Guzzo — one of the former group — told me about one of his last meetings with the powers-that-be, where one of the topics of discussion was what to rename the creator-owned Epic line of books. Guzzo suggested "Timely Comics" and — in the ensuing debate — came to the realization that he was the only one in the room who knew that Marvel Comics was originally called Timely.

We aren't ready. For even as Marvel Comics fell to ruins in lock step with the misapprehensions of comic-book stores across North America — believing in everything *except* comic books — the comics media, dominated as they are by the Legion of Junkies, were swift in their assessment. Marvel's ruination was the result of not having a successful, big-budget-movie version of one of its characters. If only Brad Pitt had agreed to play the Spider-Man! If only Jack Nicholson had agreed to play the Green Goblin! If only Martin Scorcese had agreed to direct!

Spider-Man.

Brad Pitt.
Jack Nicholson
Martin Scorcese.

We aren't ready. Linda Medley's *Castle Waiting* merits a sidebar or a single column in *Wizard, Fan, Comics Buyer's Guide*, while *Lobo vs. the Mask* warrants the cover slot and a full and detailed examination of the creative committee delegated to bring it to life. Could a *Lobo* movie be in the offing? Be still, o beating heart of the Legion of Junkies! If only the Fantastic Four had had time to cross over with a movie star like the Mask — The House That Jack Built, the House of Ideas might have been saved from the ignominy of Chapter 11. This viewpoint — so widespread as to be nearly universal — is too depraved, too perverse, too symptomatic of the dying "industry" to be contemplated without one's gorge rising.

We aren't ready.

Can the Legion of Junkies adjust their world view sufficiently to perceive that maybe — just *maybe* — DC's credibility in the direct market might — in some small measure — have *something* to do with Vertigo being an imprint known for granting a larger measure of creative control? (Let's leave aside the fact that the Vertigo contracts are undoubtedly made up of the smoke-and-mirrors of reversion clauses — i.e., "If we think the property is exhausted, you can have it back — assuming we don't renew the copyright just for laughs and to piss you off.") It's a peculiar legacy, to be sure, but isn't Vertigo really an attempt to close the barn door after Alan Moore had already fled? Come back, come back! All right, then. We'll show you — we'll have a creator-friendly division and make all of your fellow Brit writers as rich as Croesus! We'll give them all the creative freedom you wanted and *more*! We'll go to bat for them against the corporate overlords! We'll show *you*... you... Alan Moore, you.* It is perhaps not the strangest chapter in the history of creator ownership and control but it would be hard to come up with a stranger one. The façade slipped, briefly, last year when Truman, Lonsdale, DC, and Time-Warner were sued by the Winter Brothers for defamation. In pretty short order (doubtless on Paul Levitz's orders), Karen Berger cut the boys loose, hung 'em out to dry, and made noises that DC would invoke the clauses in the contracts indemnifying DC against any responsibility for lawsuits brought against the company by any third party because of content. Cooler heads prevailed — doubtless in the course of more fully contemplating the chilling effect being experienced by others of Vertigo's creative citizenry (excuse me, Mr. Levitz, sir — but didn't you just throw Mr. Tim and Mr. Joe to that pack of rabid wolves over there?). It turns out that Karen Berger misspoke — or didn't speak at all — or didn't mean what she didn't actually say (good old ditzy Karen — what *could* she have been thinking of, Paul?). Even the strangest stories can have a happy ending. And a watershed moment in the painstaking history of creator control in the comic-book medium passes with scarcely a mention outside of the pages of *The Comics Journal*. Would that the comics media's astonishment at this strangeness and its coming-to-pass had mirrored what was, doubtless, Paul Levitz's own: Holy smoke! We really *do* believe in creative freedom. Holy smoke! We *have* to!

Alas, there were multi-page articles to prepare on Superman's nuptials, lists to be composed of the legion of artists and writers delegated to document the proceedings (by all accounts on a crushing deadline imposed by the producers of *Lois and Clark*. When Television says "jump," Paul Levitz asks "how high?" on the way up). Who could be bothered with monitoring or chronicling watershed moments in the history of creative control when Superman was about to get married — and only four years after he died.*

We aren't ready

Or maybe we are. Or maybe we are closer to being ready than we are able to perceive because the comics media lag so far behind the actual learning curve that we are all fooling ourselves that all those splashy articles — unreadable computer-coloured type against garish computer-coloured Imagery — in any way reflect the comic-book field as it exists today. One would search in vain for anyone over the age of fourteen who sees *Fan, Wizard, Comics Retailer, Comics Buyer's Guide*, and the bought-and-paid-for editorial content of the *Previews* catalogue as "informative" — let alone "indispensable."

With Marvel Comics about to be fractured into a million pieces (which might already have happened by the time this sees print), with DC Comics maintaining its presence in the direct market largely through its creator-owned and sort-of-creator-controlled imprint Vertigo (again, dealing with the perception and not the reality of same), with Rob Liefeld's pseudo-Marvel comics company cast down from proximity to Todd McFarlane's Pearly Gates (Thou shalt not indulge in work made-for-hire to that extent, you moron), and with Image and Dark Horse contending for the title of More Creator-Friendly Than Thou (Larry Marder's announcement that Matt Wagner's *Mage II* would be released by Image was uncharacteristically gleeful, coming from the usually inscrutable Nexus of All Comic-Book Realities), with Jim Valentino having rung down the curtain on *Shadowhawk* and writing for Liefeld/Marvel in favour of the individual awareness, insight, and inspiration of *A Touch of Silver*, with the demise of Tekno and Broadway...

At the very least it can be said that creator ownership and control in the comic-book field have made enormous strides. If *Comics Buyer's Guide, Fan, Wizard, Comics Retailer*, and the editorial pages of *Previews* don't reflect this — well, who can blame them? As the genuine fire of individual awareness, inspiration, and insight blazes ever brighter at the margins of Dark Horse and Image, intermittently and unpredictably at Vertigo, here and there — in somewhat greater proportions — at Mad Monkey, Slave Labor, Fantagraphics, Caliber's Tapestry imprint, Drawn & Quarterly, and among the waxing and waning ranks of self-publishers, their ambition — each individual's ambition — becomes survival, pure and simple, and, if need be, meager subsistence whatever the personal toll. Comic-book newspapers and magazines, like their "real"-world counterparts, are driven by their advertising, and — to take *Comics Retailer* as an example — if the thousands of dollars needed to mount an advertising campaign are

only forthcoming from role-playing-game manufacturers, then, well, small matter to infer that role-playing games are an integral and necessary part of any comic-book store. Likewise the conventions — those summer extravaganzas of *X-Files, Star Wars, Star Trek,* Magic Cards, role-playing games, Penthouse trading cards, Spawnmobiles, and Televisions, Televisions, Televisions blaring their conquistador intentions from every aisle and booth — who can fault them for knowing which side of the bread their butter is on? If the Toronto Maple Leafs decided to buy ten thousand dollars' worth of booth space and print up special Toronto Maple Leafs Salute The San Diego Comic Con drinking cups and eyeshades, can any among us imagine that Faye Desmond (or any other Big Con Director) would deny them the opportunity? With their colourful blue costumes (like super-heroes) and their propensity for thumping, grinding, pounding conflict, wouldn't the Toronto Maple Leafs have at least — at *least* — as much in common with the comic-book field as role-playing games and video games? Conversely (from the vantage point of the Big Con Director), of what importance are creator control and ownership in the comic-book field if it chooses to use its meager resources to keep itself alive and pay printing bills on its next issue or its first trade-paperback collection instead of approaching the Chicago Comicon with its chequebook at the ready and every intention of sponsoring a dinner or a cocktail party, an awards ceremony or a Creator Control Day at that night's White Sox game (just consider the Television exposure!).

For the time being, there seems to be little more that can be done than to be patient and derive what meager enjoyment is to be had in watching the residual St. Elmo's Fire of corporate control writhing upon the scrap-heap of history as it is portrayed and as it portrays itself in the pages of *Comics Buyer's Guide, Comics Retailer, Fan, Wizard,* the editorial pages of *Previews,* at those wacky summer cons, on comics' own Television show, *The Gravity Room* (oh, please, don't get me started on *that* one), and all other misapprehensions born of the larger misapprehension that comic-books-centered-on-Television are destined for anything besides a one-way trip to oblivion. The mere act of turning off your Television, staying away from your computer, and participating in the new and irresistible wave of individual awareness, insight, and inspiration washing clean the Television-infested corners of the comic-book environment is all the reward any one of us could ask. Each individual with his or her own contribution as creator or retailer — or as a genuinely creator-friendly publisher or as a new distributor willing and eager to nurture a creator-owned title up from sales of 700 an issue to 1000 to 1200 — prepares the way for the new environment, based on individual awareness, insight, and inspiration…three things that will, in a decade or two, prove to be as resistant, as unassailable, as anathematic and indigestible to the Television Beast as was the loudness and lewdness of rock 'n' roll four decades ago.

It will be a lot of hard work, and many individuals will not make the grade, but hard work, in my view, is its own reward to the wise — not an insurance policy promising that someday no work will be required and the rewards will continue unabated. In my experience, I have never met a creator who regretted experimenting with creative freedom despite the toll it took in a reduced standard of living or a diminishment of creature comforts. Quite the contrary — once creators experience total creative freedom, they become single-minded in their quest to achieve it again whether by adhering to a creator-friendly company or by self-publishing. Once individual awareness, insight, and inspiration take hold, hard work and required sacrifices become, not a price to be paid, but, rather, a key element in bringing individual awareness, insight, and inspiration to full flower.

At this point in the direct market's history — whether consciously or unconsciously, acknowledged or unacknowledged — everything (*except* the comics media and comic-book conventions) is reshaping itself around the perceived needs of comic-book creators, adjusting its own needs to accommodate the requirements of creator control and creator ownership. Small wonder that everything has gone so quiet after the major convulsions in the distribution end of things. Creator control and creator ownership are best served by the calm and quiet within which individual awareness, insight, and inspiration flourish best.

We may not be ready — each individual creator and retailer — but the environment is certainly changing in such a way to enable us to be ready.

And if that is the case, then the future is — for all intents and purposes — already here.

And Television and the Legion of Junkies be damned.

stephen holland

PAGE 45

As I had promised Stephen and Mark, I sent them part four of "Comics & the Mass Medium" to check my observations for accuracy. Although Stephen is very gentlemanly about it, I have clearly misrepresented Page 45 in the worst way possible — by erring on the side of pessimism rather than optimism. The problem arises because I was attempting, in my references to the store, to bridge the chasm between what Page 45 is and what traditional comic-book retailing is all about. Stephen corrects this problem eloquently. So, apart from asserting that all elements of the store referred to in the early part of his letter (stock control, layout, book sales…to which I would add individual awareness, insight, and inspiration) get an unqualified highest approval rating from both myself and Gerhard, I am printing the full text of his fax without further comment. For those retailers who flatter themselves that they do "pretty good with the independents"…well, uh. Stephen?

Dear Dave,

"Comics and the Mass Medium," part four:

There seems little point in answering an essay with an essay (which I could, and may still), especially since the majority would consist of confirmation rather than contention, differing only in perspective and example. I only regret that I lack part three. Thank you.

As to Page 45's representation, no qualms.

This, then, under the banner of *Just So You Know.*

Superheroes are the biggest selling item at Page 45.

Depends on how you look at it. Out of fourteen categories, superhero comics remain the largest sellers, certainly (the graph that accompanies this is in colour, but should still be readable), but combining comics and trade paperbacks/graphic novels, independents have now pulled up to equal superheroes, each representing approximately 35% of our sales. I believe most readers will assume either that comics include TPBs or that superheroes represent more than 50% of our sales. As an aside, I have to confess that I was surprised to see you were more intrigued by our superhero sales than our stock control, layout, book sales, etc. ?!? Whatever.

The difference between the traditional store's answers to "Where are we going and what are we doing?" and Page 45's is the decision to answer the second question first: "What are we doing?"

The points that follow on from this are entirely valid. Entirely. It's just that this statement simply isn't true.

The very *first* question we asked and answered for ourselves is: "What do we want to achieve?" As we have stated previously and unequivocally, our primary goals are twofold.

1. To bring comics to the masses, the Real Mainstream, the 99% who don't yet read comics, thereby securing the future of this medium and its industry in the U.S. and U.K.

2. To make as much money as possible whilst doing so.

The latter is *entirely* dependent upon the implementation of the former. We *then* asked ourselves: "How are we going to achieve this?"

1. By supplying the material that the masses — the Real Mainstream — will want to buy, in the format they will buy it, in an environment they will feel comfortable in.

2. To go out, educate the masses, then drag them into contact with this material.

3. To show other retailers that it's easy, highly profitable, and how to do it themselves.

And *then*, of course, we got down to the nitty-gritty of marketing, merchandising, shop design, stock control, information, customer services (including standing orders), advertising, window displays, all of which, absolutely, had to be planned with the clear understanding of The Market As It Stands — in short, all the stuff I talked about in the Open Letter (Now Or Never).

As I said, Just So You Know.

However, I do have a bone of contention I've voiced before but which I am convinced is important enough to repeat within the context of your essay. I'll get to it a little later, but I think you'll see it coming.

We aren't ready/The biggest impediment? Or maybe we are.

Oh, we are ready, of that I am certain.

If, as you say, we *aren't* ready because creators, unshackled, have only just begun their exploration of creative freedom, well, sure. I agree — in the sense that there is so much to look forward to. But (and it's a crucial "but") there's enough quality *already* here to feed one thousand comics shops across the U.S. and the U.K. for years to come. There is enough (Real) Mainstream material to feed the needs and requirements of the (Real) Mainstream mass audience, likewise, for many years to come. As you say, that is Page 45's contention.

How many people own *To the Heart of the Storm*? A few thousand. How many people, if they came into contact with *To the Heart of the Storm*, would buy, read, and adore it? I deliberately choose but one recent example of a quiet, self-contained graphic novel. This tiny, tiny piece of genius has several million sales in it in the U.S. and U.K. alone. The Eisner Library? The Eisner Library and all other graphic novels under the genre called Fiction (Do you really want me to list them? That's about three pages of trade paperbacks / graphic novels alone.) have the same potential in my view: several million sales *each*.

How many people own *Why I Hate Saturn*? A few thousand more? Perhaps, perhaps not, actually. How many people, if they came into contact with *Why I Hate Saturn*, would buy, read, and adore it? I deliberately choose but one recent example of a quiet, self-contained graphic novel (and, parenthetically, I deliberately choose one published in whatever fashion you want to call it by DC). This tiny, tiny piece of genius has several million sales in it in the U.S. and U.K. alone. *Why I Hate Saturn* and all other pieces of comic-book humour (Do you really want me to list them? That's about three pages of trade paperbacks/graphic novels alone.) have the same potential in my view: several million sales *each*.

How many people own *Cerebus: High Society*? Many more thousand? Negligible. How many people, if they came into contact with *Cerebus. High Society*, would buy, read, and adore it? I deliberately choose a single example of what is a huge line of a single creator's works of genius, and this single example has several million sales in it in the U.S. and U.K. alone. The *Cerebus* Library? The *Cerebus* Library and all other graphic novels under the genre called... ummm (And therein lies a point — yours, I believe. Do you really want me to list them? That's about three pages of trade paperbacks/graphic novels alone.) have the same potential in my view: several million sales *each*.

And don't get me started on Neil Gaiman and adult fantasy. Ten pages? Twenty?

They may not all be genius level yet, but by god they have sales in them. And one of the reasons they do have so many sales in them, ironically enough, is because we (the retailers) have committed the crime of ignoring them for so long.

We *are* ready. Right now. Page 45 was fortunate enough to open just when we (or rather you, the creators) were ready, waiting, and about to go into full throttle.

Because of the hard work, determination, inspiration, and (in so many cases) real sacrifice of so many creators this century, we have a gold mine, a gold *planet* of Real Mainstream material in the form of comic-book fiction, comic-book adult fantasy, comic-book humour, comic-book whatever, ready and waiting for us lucky retailers to pillage, plunder, and make a bloody fortune from. I feel like a pirate — or a magpie at the very least. It's too easy.

The material is here, more and more of it is being republished as trade paperbacks (keeping it in print, in stock, and turning it into a format which the Real Mainstream prefers — just look at those TPB sales on the graph, rising, inexorably, season on season — with the exception of *media*-related items: the *television* ones!). Our sales prove that it is already highly profitable for retailers if they follow our methods with conviction, so all that is needed is for more retailers like Page 45 to open so that it is finally profitable rather than just viable, or worse, for the creators.

And that's why we're so vocal: to help create more Page 45s.

Regardless of television and all the truths you have so insightfully perceived and eloquently expounded, we *are* ready.

There is an impediment in the portrayal of who we are outside the comics community (as I not only conceded but emphasized in the Open Letter some eighteen months ago). But the real impediment, the only real impediment lies in Comic-book Retail. Solving the latter would solve the former. And if there is any impediment to this in the portrayal of who we are *within* the comics community, it comes not from *Wizard*, who know no better, or *Comics Buyer's Guide* who are irrelevant sci-fi fanatics; it comes from you.

Sorry?!?!?!?!?!?!

I don't mean you specifically, Dave. If there is anyone in the history of this medium who has done more for this industry, its creators, its retailers, its freedom of speech, through all that he says and does, so selflessly, I've never heard of that person. I've said it publicly and privately long before Page 45 owed so much to you in terms of the free publicity you've given us, the platform you've given us to address other retailers, the encouragement and advice you gave us on the UK Tour '93 (there wouldn't be a Page 45 but for that pub crawl), and now Independents Day '96. But there is one thing more that you could do. You and everyone else who is responsible for producing the material on which the future of the industry lies: Stop talking about how the material is published, and start talking about its genre, its substance, its appeal to the *Real Mainstream*.

I have been relentless and remorseless in my use of the term Mainstream in private, in print, in the shop, in my discussions with friends, with publishers, with distributors, with creators, with interviewers, and with customers, and it is starting to have an impact.

Language is the most powerful weapon this side of a nuclear missile. And you, the creators of the Real Mainstream Material, have all allowed the superhero corporations to steal this weapon, use it at your expense, at the expense of the entire industry, by usurping the term Mainstream. We used the term Independent for Independents Day because it was a neat pun on the way people perceive the Market. As it Stands. And I regret it.

Everyone knows that the Mainstream equals the majority of the population, that the Mainstream (the majority of the population) has the majority of the money (even rich people are Mainstream), that Mainstream material appeals to the Mainstream, so Mainstream material therefore equals mega-bucks.

The retailers understand this. The superhero corporations understand this. The superhero corporations, however stupid in many ways, understand that the retailers understand this. So the superhero corporations usurp the term Mainstream and claim it for their own: "Superheroes are Mainstream!"

And that's bollocks.

The truth is that the Real Mainstream does not spend money on the superhero genre.

Look at Waterstones bookshop, where the Real Mainstream shops. What sells? Fiction, adult fantasy, humour, autobiography, non-fiction (I forgot those two earlier; add them to the billions of dollars awaiting us). The Real Mainstream reads fiction, they read adult fantasy, they bawl themselves shitless over humour. That's what they spend their money on. They do not spend their money on superheroes. They spend their Mainstream money on Mainstream material which is currently being referred to *by its own creators* as…

independent. self-published. small press.

Instead of what it is: Fiction. Humour. Autobiography. Adult Fantasy.

MAINSTREAM!

As a retailer I don't actually give a fuck who publishes the material (in this context). Nor do other retailers. I could waste several paragraphs whilst losing the plot in detailing the advantages to Page 45 of dealing with self-publishers like yourselves, and acknowledging that most, but not all (*Why I Hate Saturn, Sandman…*) of this vital material that is the future of the industry is self-published or creator-controlled, but at the end of the day the retailer wants to know what will make him money. If he cannot think for himself, he needs to be told.

Page 45 will tell him (and show him by its sales) that it's fiction, that it's humour, that it's adult fantasy — that which is Mainstream in *other* media —that is the *most* profitable. Expressing it *that* way will have more meaning for retailers. *Any* retailer. "Ah, yes, fiction, humour, adult fantasy, they do well in the bookshops, they do well in the cinema, Mainstream, as you say; if only I can reach these people with this Mainstream material, I'll make much more money than I'm currently making from superheroes."

If Page 45 tells him it's independents, self-publishers, small press, it will mean bugger-all. "Ah, yes, independents, self-published, small press, they…don't exist in the bookshops; they're shown in tiny, tiny cinemas."

And in the meantime Mr. *Previews*, has reassured him that superheroes are Mainstream so that's what he continues to buy. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knows

there's something wrong there, otherwise the bookstores would be full of superheroes, the cinemas would be exploding with superhero films (there's hardly a blockbuster one could refer to as superheroes, they're adult fantasy — *Preacher*-style at least), but none has bothered to enlighten him in terms he can relate to.

Instead, the superhero corporations tell him they're Mainstream, and all the Real Mainstream persist in *agreeing* with them ("We're tiny, ever such small people, but you'd do much better if you bought more of *our* stuff and less **MAINSSSSSSSSSTREAM** material")!

What kind of message is that?! And I see it all the time in all of your letters columns, all of your interviews — superb, intelligent creators, with otherwise blinding insight, who produce excellent fiction, humour, adult fantasy, autobiography— referring to their own material as independent (dahling), and superheroes as **MAINSSSSSSTREAM**; and they wonder why the retailers are still buying superheroes!?!?!?!?!?

You can waste time arguing about words, I know, but in this instance — if we are going to change the way that retailers (and distributors) think, or, better and more likely yet, encourage new professionals (oh, god, please, some *professionals*) to enter this industry at the retail level and start from a completely fresh perspective — we have *got* to stop selling the viable, commercial material short, and start, without compromise, to refer to it both by genre and as Mainstream.

Yes, for a while, we will have to qualify what we say with a "Real" prefix, and there are times when use of the word Independent is unavoidable — for example when referring to Diamond's Independent Booklist (for that's what they call it) — but I think it's time to begin a mass campaign of non-compliance regarding the corporations' and Diamond's and even the customers' use of the word Mainstream. As to Independents Day, we're thinking about that, very hard. If my plans for 1998 come off, it should work pretty well.

There.

I wonder how that went down? *(Speaking for myself, Stephen, I am suitably ashamed.. Thank you — Dave)*

As I said, a brilliant series of essays. To which the above barely relates. Guess it's just on my mind.

I will send some more stuff off by post, probably addressed to Gerhard, given that you're only marginally more interested in graphs than Mark (and, trust me, you *are* only marginally interested). They do show outrageous growth for this last quarter. And this quarter, so far, is 25% up on 1996's first quarter, so hurrah.

In the meantime, thanks, as always,
Stephen Holland

P.S. If you mean the *public* isn't ready, because they're so obsessed with television, again, I beg to differ. They appear to be ready enough to sustain growth in Nottingham — genuine Mainstream growth at that — and comics fit perfectly into the beefburger/televisual age of the five-second attention span.

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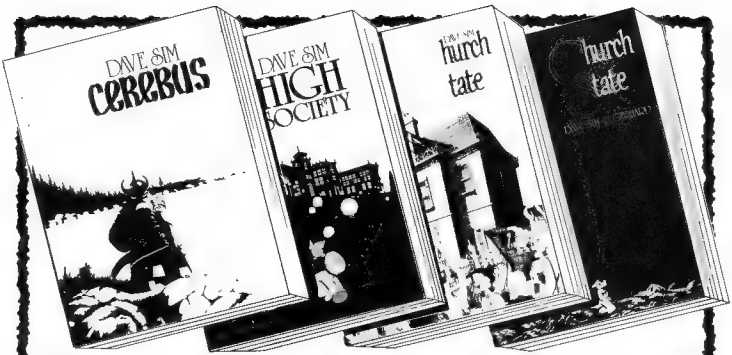

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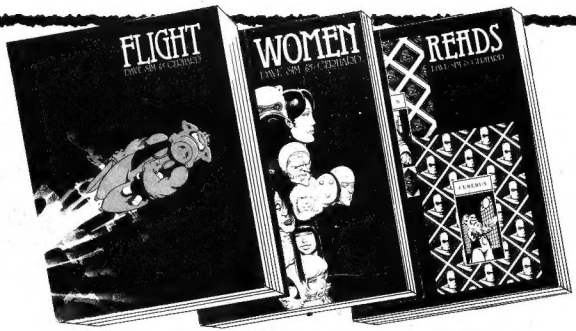

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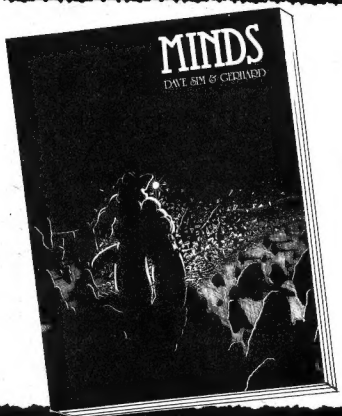

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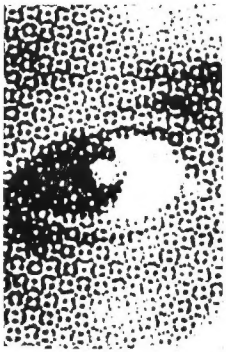

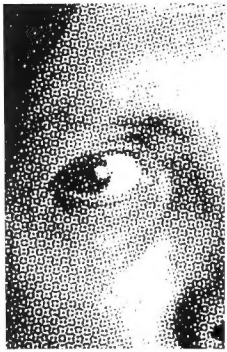

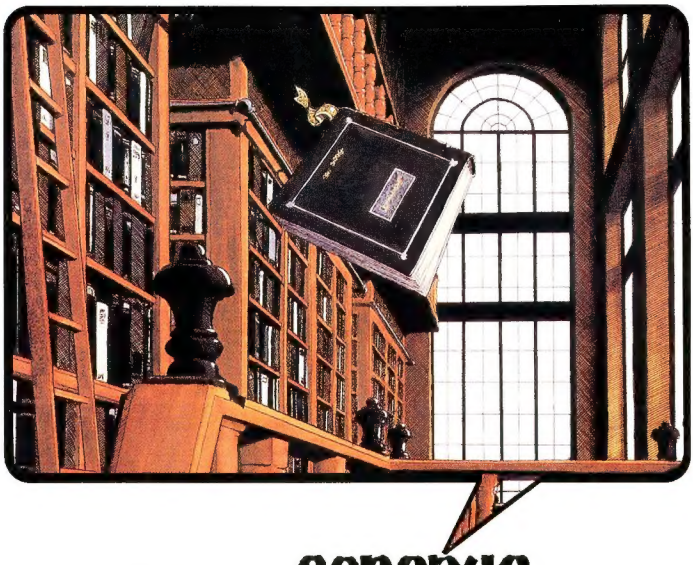

What if CEREBUS *comics were forbidden?*

Outrageous? Sure it is, but the works of many comic book professionals have been seized and sometimes banned by the real life thought police.

The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund was founded to fight these threats. In the last five years, the CBLDF has spent over $200,000 defending First Amendment rights in the comic book industry. We have successfully defended or deterred over a dozen threats to comic book artists, publishers, and retailers from over-zealous police departments, prosecutors, and would-be censors.

Please help us continue our mission to fight censorship by making a donation. With your support, the CBLDF can continue to champion comic book professionals' freedom of speech. After all, it's the thought police that should be banned!

(clip and mail)

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